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A POLITICAL NOVELIST AND MORE.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

WHEN people had wearied of sighing in vain for the great American novel, they began to cherish a more specific longing, and to ask for a great political novel of our own. Many then arose to tell them why they could not have it, and furnished them several plausible reasons, without satisfying them that the reasons were almost if not quite as good as the novel they wanted. I remember that I myself was one of those who tried to pacify the insurgent masses, though I must own that their clamor seemed to be largely the making of such as were trying to still it. As nearly as I can now recall it my little explanation was that we could not have a political novel of the English make (which seemed to be the ideal) because our politics were not good society like the English politics; were not society at all, were wholly impolite, were outcast, were no more of æsthetic import than the hobo of the highway or of the empty freight-car; unpsychological, unicellular, incapable of the dramatic encounter of the man-soul and the woman-soul, which I neatly held (not quite in those terms) to be the primary and ultimate business of fiction. This showed how very nearly less than nothing I knew of the matter, though my conclusions would have been just enough if they had rested firmly upon facts duly ascertained. But my facts, as I imagined them, were so alluring that I had not taken the trouble to ascertain them. Up to a certain point I had proceeded scientifically, but I had erred in failing to submit my hypothesis to the test of observation.

What we really needed for the creation (or call it by the modester name of invention) of a good political novel was a good politician able from his conscience as well as his knowledge to divine the shape of things pretty constantly before the eyes

of all. Such a politician brought fine literary skill, right literary method and true literary ideal to the enterprise when Mr. Brand Whitlock wrote "The Thirteenth District," and possessed us of a political novel as yet unmatched by its English antitypes. What had already happened in American manufactures of many kinds when Americans brought their minds and their morals to them happened now: the American goods were the best in the market, not only because the shapeliest and neatest and of the best workmanship, but because the honestest also, honestest in material and handling.

This extraordinary story was not the first political fiction made in America; as is well known, there is no first in any kind. Before Mr. Whitlock had discovered the Illinois boss Rankin, who makes and unmakes the Congressman from The Thirteenth District, that very able and acute observer of the middling American life, Harold Frederick, had divined the nature of an up-State local boss, his typical ambition and his glad lust of power; whenever he had touched politics Mr. William Allen White had touched the quick; Mr. Whitlock himself in several minor studies of ward bosses and ward politics from the vantage of a Chicago newspaper reporter had caught the very meaning of them, and in his recurrences to rural Ohio politics had never failed of it. With eyes mostly held from what was before them by the dazzle of purely literary allures, I had yet known something of what goes on in caucuses and conventions; and I knew their composite physiognomy so well that I recognized with the joy that has never failed me in true work the truth of the first sketch of his that came in my way. From that time on it was only a question with me of more or less pleasure of whatever he did; and I cannot say that "The Thirteenth District" is better than his many magazine stories and sketches of our political life. Its greatness (if I may indulge myself in such a word) is in its wider range and deeper plunge; not in its keener veracity.

Of course the tragedy of the book is in the gradual rotting of the "hero's" soul; it was a pretty rotten soul to begin with; and the moral is in the fact that rotten souls are apt to remain so in spite of adversity. The uses of that are indeed sweet, but only for those who can swallow the bitter of life and realize that it is a wholesome tonic, sovereign against selfishness and self-indulgence. The Congressman from The Thirteenth District wins

his first nomination and election through the favor of the really simple-hearted, boyish-natured boss who certainly admires his showy gifts and cheap arts, but loves better the joy of the struggle in which he downs their enemies. A fine thing in the author's realization of him is his infatuation with the work of his own hands; he comes to stand in awe of his figment where it has taken on the glare of a vulgar Washington sojourn, and he lets it patronize him and snub him while he serves it with heroic zeal. There is something beautiful in that, quite as beautiful as the final compunction which he feels in having destroyed his image of a man after the wretched traitor had played him false and broken the most sacred promise he was capable of.

Rankin the boss is a greater creation than Garwood the Congressman, but the true hero of the tale is the Thirteenth District itself, the political situation as it lies in the natures of the politicians fighting for and against Garwood. The most masterly passages of the book are those which dramatize almost sensibly before the reader the episodes and incidents of the convention which nominates Garwood for the second time. The picture, the stage picture, abounds in figures painted to the life and animated with the ignoble passions which might make us tremble for democracy if we did not remember the relentless greed of oligarchies, the cruel and unbridled lusts of despotism, and dread them more. It is wholly by filibustering that the second nomination is managed, but the filibustering is masterly; it is magnificent, but not so magnificent as to cease being war. Remorseless and unscrupulous strategy carries the day, and the boss and his wonderful lieutenant remain with the good conscience of generals who have tricked and outwitted the enemy in the other kind of war, which honors not merely murder but every manner of lying in word and deed.

The study of the campaign that follows when the party forces have been compelled to accept the leadership chosen for them is relatively unimportant; but it is all as faithful as the finished historical painting of the convention. The successively important events are those which conclude the whole story, but except for the end they are dealt with panoramically rather than dramatically. The psychology of Garwood's decay, or rather the revelation and realization of it, is something most uncommon. Garwood's congenital dishonesty is suggested with so little in-

sistence that the fact remains in the background of the reader's consciousness; and his treachery to Rankin comes with a shock; you perceive that even without his necessity, his extremity, he would not have much minded betraying his friend; it was in him, it was his nature. It is more striking, but it is not so interesting, not so important, as his quick corruption by the coarser luxuries of the capital, and his repulsion for the dull little community and the shabby little country town of his district. He hates it all, its rawness, its squalor, its familiarity, but he is vitally dependent upon it. The time for his re-election comes round with pitiless swiftness, and he is flung into the struggle with cruel loathing in his heart for the very means of victory, of renewed escape; not a moral loathing, but a sort of ignorant, social loathing, largely the effect of the fat hotel living and the padded ease of official immunity from the every-day stress of earning a livelihood. He has the cunning to perceive that as a representative of the people he is of no importance in the capital, but he has a sensual preference of his futility to any genuine use through work. Yet when once again in his armor he fights boldly and bravely, and nimbly avails himself of any false and base chance of victory. When it comes to his third nomination, and he is beaten in the convention by the friend he had betrayed, he takes to drink for a while, but his debauch does not last. He pulls up from it and from his financial ruin, and stumps the Thirteenth District for his successful rival within the party. He simply remains after that, waiting any new opportunity of self-aggrandizement on the same moral level where his whole public life had passed.

One thing that Mr. Whitlock's book distinctly teaches is that a man's public life and private life are of a sole texture; that there is no official personality; that a man cannot be innerly true and outerly false. Garwood is a poor, flimsy, recreant politician, because he is that sort of son and husband. He is as unworthy of his mother and his wife as he is of the true men among his constituents, as he is even of the kind, foolish, morally purblind boss who bears him no malice when he has punished his treachery, and would imaginably be willing to help the ruthless scoundrel to his feet again. I am not sure but of the two men Rankin is not the more important study. All the men in the book are æsthetically *good*. The little rascal editor who profits by Garwood's treason to the boss is mighty good; he is quite

visibly, tangibly good, and so is that wonderful "Singed Cat," Bailey, who presides at the nominating convention, and tricks and bullies Garwood into the first place. It will be long, if it will be ever, before that figure is approached in our fiction, and I do not mind saying it is not surpassed, as far as it goes, in any fiction.

The women of the book are imagined in that abeyance where our political system keeps them. I have an odd feeling that when women get the votes that men cannot long deny them, the mother and wife of Garwood will have the importance in the retrospect which they now have not, though every touch in their portrayal is true. So it is almost in that of Dade Emerson, with her varying ideals of French, English and Southern superiority to her native Illinoisian civilization in accent. Say, she is a little caricatured, and you must still own that she is charming, and a good girl, and a wise woman for all her folly.

But it may be owned that Mr. Whitlock's women are not so wonderfully good as his men; when they become politicians with the suffrage they may be so; it does not avail that they are already log-rollers, lobbyists, wire-pullers, without the responsibility of voters, slight as that so often is with men. In such a delicious comedy as "*Her Infinite Variety*," with its honeyed sting of satire (what a pity it could not be put on the stage!) it is still only society, only surface, womanhood which is studied. The unscrupulosity of the voteless women who wish other women to remain voteless was never better expressed than in the behavior of the anti-suffrage ladies who come down from Chicago and personally defeat the woman lawyer who is dealing professionally with the suffrage resolution before the legislature. It is through the slightness of the hero, his blindness to the wiles which ensnare him, that they triumph; but perhaps it is subtly meant by the author that in such circumstances all men are flimsy and fatuous, and that women's cunning will not cease to be triumphantly pitted against men's wisdom till women are civically equal with men.

After all, I am not sure the little story is a comedy, or so much a comedy as it is a tragedy. The heart is left aching for the brave professional woman whom the society women have downed in the legislature, though she shows herself so capable of meeting them in an encounter of wit. It had to end so, and

so it cannot be a comedy; but there is no doubt that "The Happy Average" is an idyl of the kindest and truest make. Apparently Mr. Whitlock means the story for a protest against the dire implications of the old adage that "the course of true love never did run smooth." So indeed it did not, but because nothing runs smooth in a world where events retard and contrary the fulfilment of all dear hopes, whether they are of wealth or health or happy marriage, but do not finally defeat them. He has set himself the pleasant task of showing how in a civilization where ninety-nine hundredths of the marriages are love-marriages, the way of a typical one through poverty and paternal prudence is beset by no perils which a little wholesome patience will not abate. It is the story truly of the happy average of American marriages, whose blissful romance lies in the entirely reasonable certainty that they are inevitable from the unlimited opportunities of love-making. It is told with a humor which scarcely suffers itself ever to become irony, and it is full of the spirit of innocent and indomitable youth, with its eager enterprises, its fervent admirations, its devoted friendships. Its range is from a little Central Ohio town to Chicago, where the lover goes to win his place in journalism, and finally resumes the study of the law which he had begun in Maccohee. It is all very winningly done, with the types which are each a character touched with affectionate and unfailing accuracy, and the endearing commonness of the circumstance unblinkingly presented in the vision of eyes that see it tenderly, reverently. I could wish that this lovely and honest book could find its way to those alien inquirers who sometimes express the wish to know us as we are, in spite of the newspaper facts, which also show us as we are. I could say to them: "This is the very American life. This is unquestionably the happy average. If you ask me how I reconcile such bliss with our abounding misery in matrimony, our separations, our marital murders, our unhappy average of one divorce to every seven marriages, I answer frankly that I do not reconcile it, while I affirm again that this story of the Happy Average is a faithful picture of American life on those immeasurable levels which are as high above poverty as they are below luxury."

It is proof of an author's power if you recur to the books of his which you have read and find something freshly interesting in them. This power has evinced itself to me in the gentle charm

of "The Happy Average," and I feel it in the dreadful fascination which draws me again to "The Turn of the Balance," and makes me prisoner to its iron reality. It is again the harsh lines of civic drama; here is no scene of playful satire, no pleasing picture of idyllic matter-of-fact, but a grim etching of our underworld, bitten in with corroding acid wherever the thin coating of social hypocrisy yields to the keen point of the artist's needle. It is as unsparing an accusation of legality as Tolstoy's "Resurrection," and it is made with greater authority from more practical knowledge. Mr. Whitlock is the Mayor of Toledo, thrice elected, without volition of his, by the indefatigable persistence of a majority of his fellow citizens over the minority of all the other political parties uniting against him; he knows what the administration of the law is. He is himself an attorney locally successful in civil and criminal practice, and when a young man, well under forty, of such ability as to have won in the Supreme Court of Ohio a case against the State and obliged it to the revision of an entire body of legislation; he knows what the procedure of courts is. He has been a reporter and he knows the "criminal classes," including the police, with the sharp, unsparing penetration of a newspaper man. He is a philanthropist; he has studied the condition and government of prisons; and he knows the facts of them. This awful book is the sum of his experience and observation, and to his practical authority in the matter he joins the instinct of a poet and the conscience of a politician whose advance in public life has been through his unselfish service of his fellow citizens and their grateful recognition. It not only touches the heart with the force which the creative imagination alone can exert, but it compels conviction with the power of unimpeachable statistics.

It will be understood that it is not light or pleasant reading. It will not take the "tired business-man's mind off itself" like a musical comedy or a wild tale of adventure; it will not stupefy the brain (such as it is) of a "society girl" with the fume of "passion"; it will not drug the soul of boyhood with the dream of conquest among the princesses of unmapped kingdoms; it will not flatter or betray any reader to a vain belief in a perfected Americanism. But if one wishes to know what the author declares the truth about the conditions that produce, and the courts that punish, and the prisons that perpetuate the hundreds of thousands

of criminals "in this fair land," here one may learn it. In what school the author has studied not how to imitate this master or that, but "how to imitate nature," the mother of all the arts, is plain enough. It is the great Russian school which embodies an æsthetic recalling the novelist to the study of man as we all know him in the flesh, and an evangel renewing the power and glory of the Son of Man in the imagination, and dedicating it once more to the service of the soul.

What Zola was to Frank Norris in his large epics, Tolstoy has been to Brand Whitlock in this tremendous tragedy. It is no more a polemic than life is; it does but show us what life is in phases which we blink and ignore. If it tears from our eyes the bandage which we fancied on those of Justice and shows her winking at the same crimes against criminals in the American courts and the Russian courts, and in their differing procedure arriving at the same wicked and stupid ends, it is certainly not for us to reject it as impossible. The accusation is too bold, too unsparing, made from an experience too questionless to be dismissed as the effectivism of a novelist. It is true that Mr. Whitlock shares Tolstoy's doubt of all punishment as a deterrent, and as a reformant holds it too sadly grotesque for laughter. He is an officer of the law, and his fellow citizens will have him keep his office from year to year; yet he tells them, as he tells us all, in this book that the administration of the law and the execution of the law are iniquitous and of the nature of the frauds and complicities and violences constituting the criminality which the laws are always arresting and trying and punishing. The study of these alleged operations of the laws will have the prime fascination of the book for the thoughtfuler reader; as for the sheer dreadfulfulness of those hells which the by-laws of wardens and guards make of the penitentiaries (the word is mockingly wrenched from its fitness by the facts) that is for the gust of the strong stomachs which can sup on horrors without physical revolting. With all, "The Turn of the Balance" is a work of literary art, simple in style, dramatic in the representation of life; clear, shapely and rounded to the imperative climax. Perhaps after the sins it accuses are repented of we shall enjoy its æsthetic beauty and experience from it in the retrospect that "noble terror" which the Greeks thought the office of tragedy.

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